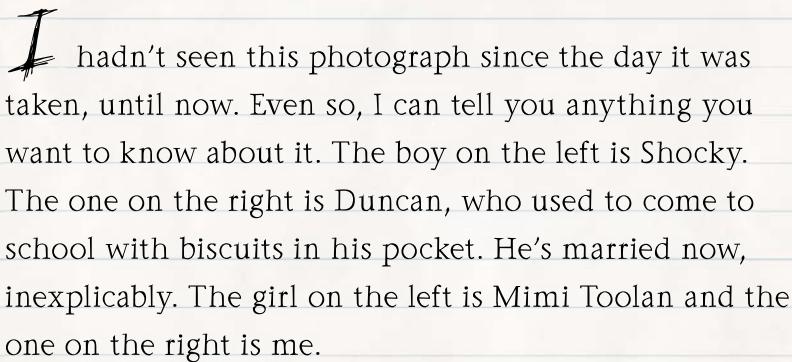




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our good guide

I hadn't seen this photograph since the day it was taken, until now. Even so, I can tell you anything you want to know about it. The boy on the left is Shocky. The one on the right is Duncan, who used to come to school with biscuits in his pocket. He's married now, inexplicably. The girl on the left is Mimi Toolan and the one on the right is me.

At the moment the picture was taken, I was mostly wondering whether Mimi would ask me back to hers after school. Mimi's mother let her play with her make-up, which my mother definitely did not, even though I was mature and sophisticated.

I was also thinking Oh. My. Days. Shocky has put his hand on my shoulder! Once, just before Christmas, I had managed to manipulate Shocky into being my partner in a classroom activity. This should

have resulted in a moment of physical contact because it was a trust game, only it turned out that Shocky was not to be trusted. And by the time this photograph was taken, Shocky had completed an unbroken run of two hundred and thirty-seven days of failing to notice my existence.

How do I remember my thoughts so clearly? Because those were the only thoughts I had in the first two terms of Year Six:

1. Mimi, can I come back to yours?

2. Shocky, please notice me.

Also, this photograph was taken in the summer term of Year Six. And doesn't everyone remember everything about their last summer in primary school? The sports day. The leavers' trip. The leavers' photograph. The endless discussion of which school you were going to next, the promise to stay friends even though you were going to different schools.

Everyone signing their names on everyone else's shirts on the last afternoon. And all the time, you had the feeling that day by day, inch by inch, a door was opening and sunshine was pouring in, and any day now you would be allowed out through that door,

laughing and yelling so loud that you wouldn't even hear when it closed behind you, for ever.

I can tell you when it was taken. It was the second week of the summer term. During morning break, Mimi spotted two kids – one big and one little, the big one holding the little one's hand – staring through the railings of the playground. The little one was wearing a furry hat and they had identical coats. Mad coats – long, like dressing-gowns, with fur inside. But any coat would have looked mad. The sun was beating down. The tarmac in the car park was melting. Everyone else was wearing T-shirts.

Mimi went over and said, "What are you two looking at?"

The big one put his finger on his lips, shushing her, and said, "Pay attention to your teacher." He pointed at Mrs Spendlove, and the very minute he did, she blew the whistle for the end of break, like he knew she was going to do it.

When we were all lined up, somehow these two were standing right behind me. I was looking at the littlest one, who had his hat pulled down right over his eyes. It looked so uncomfortable; I wanted to fix it for him – but the big one put his hand under my chin and turned my head away. "Don't look at him," he said.

He was asking for a slap, quite honestly. But before I could do anything about that, Mrs Spendlove was walking us into class. The two boys went straight to the back and the little one made himself at home in what was supposedly my seat. I stood there, staring right at him, thinking he'd take a hint. But no.

Mrs Spendlove said, "Everyone, I'd like you all to say a big hello to a new face in our class. A happy new face, I hope. This is Chingis."

Everyone said hello except me. I said, "What about the other one, Miss? What's he called?"

She hadn't noticed the little one until then. "Oh. Chingis," she said, "I'm afraid your little brother isn't in this class. He's in Miss Hoyle's class just along the corridor."

"No," said Chingis, "my little brother is in this class. Look, he's here next to me."

Everyone laughed except Mrs Spendlove. "Sorry, sorry," she said. "I mean he *belongs* in Miss Hoyle's class." She was flapping her hands at the rest of us to be quiet, mortified because she thought we were laughing at him and it was her fault. But I was standing next to him and I could see he hadn't made a mistake. He was digging in.

"Julie, would you show Chingis's brother to Miss Hoyle's class?"

I certainly would. For one thing, I wanted my seat back.

As soon as I stepped towards the little one, though, the big one put his hand up, right in my face, and said, "No."

"Excuse me?"

"He must stay with me. I am bound to take care of him. Protect him. I must stay with him."

"Well, it doesn't really work like that, Chingis. For one thing, once he's in Miss Hoyle's class, she'll protect him. And besides, he won't really need protecting because..."

He wasn't even listening. He just took out some pencils and stuff and settled down to do a bit of drawing.

Mrs Spendlove opened up her laptop and poked around for a while. "Ah," she said, talking to the little one directly. "You need to go to a different class, Kub—" and started trying to spell out this unbelievable name, syllable by syllable. Before she got to the third syllable, Chingis looked up and said, "No," again.

"No," just like that.

It was the second time he'd said no to her. Once might be a mistake. Twice was game on. Definitely. We were witnessing a struggle for power.

Mrs Spendlove made the first play. "Excuse me?" she said.

"Call him Nergui," he said. "It's easier." Which was definitely cheek in her face, telling Mrs Spendlove what to do, telling her she wouldn't be up to the job of pronouncing someone's actual name.

Mrs Spendlove slapped that down. "Well, that's not what I've got here," she said, and tried spelling out the long name again.

Chingis stood up.

She looked him in the eye.

He said, "Please."

Please was good. *Please* was some kind of stand-down.

Please was definitely points to her.

She closed the laptop really, really slowly. "OK," she said. "Just for today, you can stay in this class, Nergui."

Chingis said thank you and sat back down. It looked like victory to Mrs Spendlove. Except that somehow this kid had ended up with everything he wanted – his little brother was sitting next to him, being called by some unofficial name. Maybe Mrs Spendlove sensed this. Maybe that's why she decided she had to push it.

"So, if you take your hat off, Nergui," she said, "we can all get started."

The kid didn't move and neither did Chingis. They both just sat there, with *What're you going to do about it?* faces. Pretending they didn't understand.

She tried again. "I'm afraid you have to take your hat off, Nergui."

"No," said Chingis.

Now everyone looked at Mrs Spendlove.

"We can't have people wearing hats in class, Chingis."

Everyone looked at Chingis.

This was like watching high-tension tennis.

"It will be dangerous to take off my brother's hat."

"How can it be dangerous to take off his hat? Is his head not securely fastened to his neck?"

She got a laugh for that. The laugh gave her some edge.

"Not dangerous for him. Dangerous for you."

Mrs Spendlove frowned. Was he threatening her?

"If I take off his hat," he continued, "maybe he will go insane and kill everyone."

He was definitely threatening her. Threatening all of us. With his little brother.

"Chingis..."

"When you need your eagle to be calm, what do you do?"

"I don't know." She looked around the class. Did anyone know? Why *would* anyone know?

"Of course," he said, "you cover its eyes with a hood. When you want the eagle to fly and kill, you take

off the hood. My brother is my eagle. With his hood on, he is calm enough. Without his hood, I don't know what he will be like."

Year Six. We had been at school for six years and until that moment I thought I had probably learned all I would ever need to learn. I knew how to work out the volume of a cube. I knew who had painted the "Sunflowers". I could tell you the history of St Lucia. I knew about lines of Tudors and lines of symmetry and the importance of eating five portions of fruit a day. But in all that time, I had never had a single lesson in eagle-calming. I had never even heard the subject mentioned. I'd had no idea that a person might need eagle-calming skills.

And in that moment, I felt my own ignorance spread suddenly out behind me like a pair of wings, and every single thing I didn't know was a feather on those wings. I could feel them tugging at the air, restless to be airborne.

I wanted to talk to the new boy. I wanted to talk about eagles. But Mimi seemed to regard the whole Chingis incident as a minor interruption in the ongoing global cosmetics conversation. Only the boys were interested. At lunchtime, dozens of them crowded round Chingis and Nergui, asking them if they really had eagles, and

how big they were, and whether Chingis was a liar or not.

"Where d'you get eagles from, then? Eagles R Us?"

"Everyone has eagles where I come from."

"Where's that, then?"

"Mongolia."

They poked and pestered little Nergui, who still had his hat pulled right down, hiding his eyes. They kept telling him to make eagle noises. The kid – Nergui – huddled down in his coat, pulled his arms out of his sleeves and crossed them over his chest. His sleeves were flapping loose and he did fully look like a bird.

Then Chingis spotted me over their heads and shouted, "You. You must come and help me."

I didn't know what he expected me to do. But I was fully delighted to be asked. I slid past the boys and then turned on them. "All right," I said. "Move on. Haven't you seen a pair of Mongolian brothers before?"

"No."

"Well, you have now. So move on."

"As if they're Mongolian, anyway." It was Shocky.

"Why would they come here from Mongolia? They're probably from Speke."

Everyone agreed that the brothers were probably from Speke and then went back to their footie.

"Please stand still," said Chingis. He moved me back a bit and pulled something out of his bag that looked

like an old-fashioned radio. When he pressed a button, it made this whirring sound, the top half shot open and a lens popped out.

I know now that it was a Polaroid camera. At the time I think I thought it was some kind of mad, starey cuckoo clock.

"I need a picture," he said, "so I can remember which one you are. You are to be our Good Guide here. OK?"

Mimi had come over by this point – she could hear a camera being deployed at five hundred metres. We both did our loveliest smiles, and that would be when Shocky and Duncan came over and tried to get into the picture. Almost as soon as Chingis had clicked the button, a strip of paper rolled out of the front of the camera. He peeled off some kind of label, then waved the paper around in the air, and there we all were. Caught for ever. He wrote something on the photo, which I didn't see at the time.

I saw it for the first time today. He'd written, "Our Good Guide."

"You will be our Good Guide," he said. "In Mongolia we are nomads. When we come to a new country, we need to find a Good Guide. You will be our Good Guide in this place. Agree?"

Of course I agreed. No one had ever asked me to

be anything before, definitely not anything involving a title. And that was when I stopped thinking about make-up, lips and Shocky. That was when I started walking round the place thinking, Hi, I'm the Good Guide.

I really did want to be a good guide.